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## **History, Language and the Indian Nation**

Hephzibah Israel

### **Introduction**

The notion of ‘politics of translation’ invites deliberation on translation as a political act and indeed on how and the extent to which ‘translation’ and ‘politics’ interact in the Indian context. What role does translation play in the construction of ideas of nationhood in contemporary India and, conversely, how does it serve to challenge dominant ideas of the Indian nation? In this chapter, I wish to consider the place and function of translation in two different kinds of nation-building exercises from the post-independence past of the Indian nation state. The significant players in this hi/story identify with the idea of India as a sovereign state and seek to define it as a nation in an attempt to address a seemingly overwhelming heterogeneity that is taken to challenge the basis of a united, self-contained nation state. The kinds of interventions translations and ideas about translation may make in the conceptualisation of India as a nation state is not commonly examined but this seems particularly pertinent on the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> year of Indian Independence in 2017.

In what follows, I focus on two re-constructions of history that serve as nation-building mechanisms. One, in which literary history is constructed to build or even prove an always already present cultural ‘unity’ underlying the political state and the other a widespread controversy over a scholarly essay on translation and its implications for defining the culture and history of the Indian nation state, which first started within India but has spiralled out on to an international platform, involving scholars of South Asia and the Indian diaspora. In both cases, certain interpretations of what translation may or may not be play a performative function to perpetuate or challenge ideas of the Indian state as a unified, autonomous

‘nation’. I suggest that taking into account translation history (or histories) in the Indian context might be a useful means by which to unpack some of the complex ways in which meaning-making processes and discourses have been mobilised in the political life of post-independent India.

### **One nation, many literary histories: why does the Indian nation need translation?**

Translation in India, as can be expected in a country with multiple and sophisticated language cultures, is ubiquitous and an everyday practice. I include here both oral and textual translation, historic and current, between ‘Indian’ languages and between these and languages deemed ‘foreign’ to it at different points in time. Translations have been undertaken in all spheres of human activity, including the administrative, legal, literary, philosophical, religious, scientific and political. However, despite this long and complex translation history in the Indian context, translation has not been squarely the focus of academic or systematic study in Indian academia. The Indian cultural context is well-known for prolific translation activities without any apparent ‘theorising’ of translation historically and this situation, regrettably, continues into the present. The boom in translation of Indian language literatures into English since the mid-twentieth century has encouraged a focus on the literary translation of Indian language literatures into English (see Mukherjee 1981 and more recent studies by Kamala 2000; Mannur 2000; Kothari 2003, 2005; and Rangarajan 2014). Scholars addressing the political dimension of literary translation choice (such as Das 1991; Merrill 2008; Mukherjee 1972; Niranjana 1992; Spivak 1993; and Trivedi 1999) have pushed forward the conversation on the literary translation of Indian literatures, and have thus informed current understandings of literary history in India in important ways. A few well-established literary writer-translators working with different Indian languages have likewise written about the implications of their translation choice (Mahapatra 1981, Ramanujan 1967,

1973, 1981, 1985, Holmström 2006, to name just a few), contributing to critical reflection on literary translation.

Given the rich history of translation practice, a comprehensive translation history for the Indian context does not yet exist. In fact, a comprehensive translation history of individual Indian languages —over a thousand written and spoken in number but with just 22 recognised by the Indian constitution and of these approximately fifteen modern Indian languages with uniquely identifiable scripts and a continuous history of literary practice over at least a thousand years— has not yet been written either. But would such a monumental task, if ever undertaken, serve a purpose? Multilingualism and the complex social history of literary composition this entailed historically is celebrated as an asset but also paradoxically seen as a burden to the Indian nation-state when viewed through the lens of linguistic nationalism. With no one national language and with two equally controversial ‘official languages,’ Hindi and English, this is a subject ripe for continued anxiety in attempts to construct a unity for the Indian nation state.

‘National,’ state-funded institutions such as the Sahitya Akademi have played an important part in the construction of an Indian canon of literature by promoting writing in and translating across the twenty-two modern Indian languages, including instituting a prestigious national annual award for translation in 1989. While this is progressive in that it recognizes the importance of translation, it is also apparent that literary translation is conceived largely as a tool for the newly independent Government of India of the 1950s to achieve one of its political objectives soon after political independence in 1947: ‘The Government of India Resolution, which set forth the constitution of the Akademi, described it as a national organisation ... to foster and co-ordinate literary activities in all the Indian languages and to

promote through them all the cultural unity of the country.’ The Sahitya Akademi organised four workshops focusing solely on literary translation between 1986 and 1988 to bring together translators working in the different Indian languages to offer both theoretical grounding and an understanding of the ‘various issues and challenges that translators have to confront, especially in the multilingual Indian setting.’ (Ayyappapanicker 1991: 3). K. Ayyappapaniker’s detailed report frames participating translators as ‘activists engaged in the building up of our national literary consciousness’ (1991: n.p.) and offers opening remarks by a fellow member of the organising committee:

Too often values have tended to become parochial and localised, leading to loss, or at least overshadowing, of that ‘unity in diversity’ which has always characterised the Indian polity. ... This has given rise to the immediate need to look afresh at the very source of Indian unity—and Indian sensibility, an Indian ethos. [...] The multiplicity of language in our country has tended to erode ‘unity’ and obscured the ‘oneness’ of Indian sensibility and ethos. [...] Translation, it would appear, is the only means of providing us a release from the narrow prison-house of different languages and affording us a fresh view of oneness, unity and commonality (Ayyappapanicker 1991: 5)

This association between the many languages of India, friction arising from parochial claims to some languages as superior to others and translation is made in several other instances. For instance, another state-funded publishing house, National Book Trust, also established in the 1950s, publishes a large number of translations both into English and other Indian vernaculars, including translated literature for children, putting into effect a popular slogan, ‘unity in diversity’ (that is, national unity despite linguistic diversity), repeatedly mobilised during public events celebrating the nation at all levels, from the local school to the national

or international stage. Hence, literary translation is invested with the serious political function of promoting cultural affinity and thereby supposedly political unity by offering readers access across divisive linguistic barriers.

While both institutions encourage translations directly from one Indian language to another, the spectre of English remains in its function as ‘bridge language’ as is evident in Sahitya Akademi’s flagship journal *Indian Literature*, where Indian language literatures are translated into and discussed in English or in its commissioning and publication of the encyclopaedia of Indian Literature (6 vols. 2009) and of Das’s series of the history of Indian Literature in English. Other earlier publications such as Mohanty’s (1984) bibliography of Indian literature in English translation are envisaged with a similar purpose of helping with the ‘process of unification of consciousness’:

...translations have broken the barrier between one Indian literature and another and have forcefully established the idea of oneness in Indian Literatures which could not be done by translations from Sanskrit in the past. Readers in one Indian Literature have become increasingly aware of their neighbours which they were not before [...] to an understanding of unity and compactness of Indian Literature in spite of its many divisions (vii).

Most comparative literary study is routinely undertaken in English, in which translations into English are taken for granted as if this were a transparent, neutral part of the process that simply allows scholars direct access into a language literature they themselves cannot read first hand. This obfuscation of the process of translation, however, is expedient for the nation-building literary project of literary study and literary history.

Rather than an instrumentalist view of translation that facilitates an integration or unity of literatures written in Indian languages into the questionable category ‘Indian literature’ what if we were to deploy the study of translation as a deconstructive tool? I am aware as I ask this question that the term ‘translation’ is itself a contested category, with Indian scholars contending that translation in the Indian context does not fit standard definitions offered from within Western intellectual history, i.e. as the successful transferral of meaning intact and faithfully from *an* ‘original’ text and language into *a* ‘target’ text and language. Alternative phrases such as ‘transcreation’ (Lal 1996: 64) for conveying the emotional heart of a text accurately, ‘tellings’ (Ramanujan 1991: 24), *Chhaya* [Shadow] or verbatim translation of Prakrit texts into Sanskrit (Das 2005: 132) have been suggested as closer to the observable phenomenon in the relation between Indian texts. However, my call to greater attention to translation does not depend on positing one definition over the other as the most accurate, which would demand a separate study altogether; rather I suggest that investigating contesting interpretations of what translation has meant in the Indian context over several centuries of textual activity as well as the identification and examination of translation practice and methods can contribute to our understanding of how literary meaning and value may have been constructed over time and for what purpose. And further, to what extent this translation past can contribute to current efforts to integrate proliferating demands for the recognition of languages as distinct and markers of identity.

Despite the considerable interest in promoting literary translation on the part of national institutions, there are large gaps in our knowledge of the part played by translation historically. How did languages and their literatures develop over centuries, influence or challenge each other across this vast subcontinent? Indications of overlap and continual movement of languages and peoples demand that we pay attention to the bases and processes

of interactions and the politics that underpins these, that is, to *translation*, linguistic, cultural and metaphorical, rather than to language literatures and traditions as discrete entities. Here, examining both translation histories within individual language traditions *and* interactions between the different languages in the region is important. Understanding attitudes to and patterns of translations between translocal languages such as the Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and, from the nineteenth century, English and all other Indian languages will increase rather than dilute our knowledge of the cultural specificity of each. While there is increasing scholarship on the ‘cosmopolitan’ Sanskrit (Pollock 2009) and its interactions with ‘vernacular’ Indian languages, very rarely do any of these review the relationship between languages squarely through the lens of translation. The recent interest in studying multilingualism (Orsini 2012, 2015) in medieval North India, has stimulated some interest in translation (Cort 2015; Farooqi 2010) but still needs much further work, and extension beyond the linguistic terrains of North India. Importantly, such a focus on translation would reveal not only how classical, ‘translocal’ languages have shaped the more ‘local’ languages, but if and to what extent the latter may have influenced the former since the study of translation also highlights how ‘source’ languages and literatures are influenced by practices of translation. This emphasis on the historic role of translation in a multilingual context has potential to reveal where and why languages may have competed with each other in the political space but also instances where they may have complemented each other for shared political ends.

Interestingly, an area of translation history that has received relatively more scholarly attention is that of the translation of sacred texts, which can serve as a useful model for literary study. Translations of religious texts are historic, innumerable and have been undertaken across the language spectrum, some more obviously recognizable as ‘translations’



and others that are deemed creative re-uses of another's sacred poetics. Straddling both literary and sacred spaces in the Indian context, studies of these texts and their translations supplement literary histories in the different languages as they show the movement of these texts from one set of linguistic, sacred and cultural contexts to another. The role of translation in the transfer and shaping of religious cultures and identities in pre-modern India, for instance, has received steady and welcome critical attention, particularly in the last twenty years. The translations of texts, performance and devotional practices between religious communities in India has been studied by scholars examining translations between Buddhist and Hindu communities (Monius 2001), between Islamic and Hindu communities (Stewart 2001; Ricci 2011; Nair 2014; Tschacher 2011, 2016; Irani forthcoming) and between Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities (Zupanov 2005; Israel 2011). The significance of the translation's role in colonial encounters of the religious traditions of India have also been examined critically by several scholars. In this case, however, the greater focus is on translation encounters between Indian languages, texts or religions and Orientalist/Christian scholarship (Herling 2006; Dodson 2007; Mandair 2009; Israel 2014) in the Portuguese, German, Latin and English. This body of scholarship has shown the importance of taking into account the politics of translation practices as central to the encounters between religious traditions, whether competitive, responsive or conciliatory.

The promotion of translation by political regimes is a further area that offers a third perspective to an examination of the interface between translation, literature and politics in the Indian context but which needs much further attention. As I mentioned earlier, there have already been a few studies examining a number of translation projects during British imperial rule in India and their effects in consolidating British colonial presence in India from the late eighteenth century onwards (Niranjana 1992; Trivedi 1993; Bassnett and Trivedi 1999);

rather than cover the same ground again, I would like to consider what images of translation present if we were to look deeper into the historic past, that is, at periods before the arrival of European imperialist and translators? For instance, one of the historical periods before the dominance of the Orientalist scholar-translator which witnessed the systematic advancement of translation was that of the Mughal courts from the mid sixteenth to the mid seventeenth centuries. The translations promoted by the Mughal emperors, most notably by Akbar (r. 1556-1605) and Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), into and out of Persian, the language of the Mughal courts, have more recently drawn the attention of scholars to examine translation in the intellectual culture and political milieu of sixteenth and seventeenth-century India. The translation of texts between Persian and Sanskrit initiated by Akbar from the mid 1570s was central to Mughal political policy and its relations with an assortment of political allies and competitors, and continued to be of interest to his successors, including his great-grandson Prince Dara Shikuh in the early seventeenth century.

The eclectic translation bureaux set up under Akbar's patronage, involving Hindu brahmins, Jains, Jesuits and Muslim scholar-translators, served Mughal political purposes in ways different to colonial translation. Alam and Subrahmanyam (2009) have argued that Akbar and Jahangir's desire to patronise the translation of religious texts indicates their ambitions not as much to synthesize all religions to create a new universal religion but was in keeping with the imperial image that they sought to project of themselves as having understood the secrets and beliefs of all other rulers and empires. Further, in her recent book, Truschke (2016) makes the compelling argument that the concern with translating between two vastly different literary, textual and religious traditions was not so much in the interest of justifying Mughal (and Islamic) rule to a majority Hindu population as it has been argued or merely to integrate distinct religious thought systems but was very much a political decision to consolidate

Mughal power in congruence with existing notions of kingliness. Pointing out that amongst the range of Sanskrit texts that the Mughals sponsored for translation into Persian, astronomical and mathematical treatises, historical chronicles, philosophical works, religious scriptures and story collections, translations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* figured repeatedly as the focus of imperial attention, Truschke argues (2016: 101-104) that these translations were central to the Mughal political project of envisioning themselves as part of a well-established and popular conceptualization of kingship in circulation in India. Royal patronage supported a team of translators and illustrators to produce beautifully illustrated Persian translations of the two epics with accompanying prefaces by key figures in the Mughal court. These translations were copied repeatedly until the end of the eighteenth century, suggesting that these Persian versions were relevant and valued beyond the courtly context. Particularly pertinent to our discussion of the intersection between translation and politics here is Truschke's (2016: 39-40; 205) contention that the primarily political function underlying Akbar's commissioning of Persian translations was achieved either by avoiding the theological content of the original as in the case of *Razmnamah* (the Persian *Mahabharata*) presented as the *Book of War* or by co-opting Hindu theology in Akbari translations of the *Ramayana*, to the extent of figuring Akbar himself as the just and righteous king Rama.

While these imperial translations into the elite Persian were put to imperial uses, during this very period in Akbar's reign, the *Ramayana* was also re-composed in Hindi, one of the northern Indian languages, by the poet Tulsidas (1532-1623) rendering the epic simultaneously accessible to the Hindi-speaking masses. As Trivedi pointed out at the Jaipur Literary Festival 2016, it is remarkable not only that a landmark translation of a 'high Hindu scriptural text' was undertaken metaphorically 'under the Mughal tent' but that such is the

complexity of the historical circumstances of its composition that it does not bear evidence of being eclipsed by the shadow of a ‘foreign’ rule or religion. That this Hindi, and a celebrated Hindu version, could have been started and completed well within the reign of a Muslim emperor is a point often forgotten in current-day Hindu majoritarian claims of an oppressive Muslim rule, reinforcing that there is a politics *to* and *of* forgetting about histories of translation that can serve political nationalist ends. Moreover, that the Sanskrit *Ramayana* was almost simultaneously translated both into the elite Persian and the then demotic Hindi is an aspect of translation history that can bring to light the range of political choices exercised in sixteenth-century India; but even more significantly in contemporary India, in the very interpretation of this history in the cause of the nation.

How do these several strands of translation speak to the multilingual and multi-literary contexts chartered above? Genealogies of translation can highlight dynamic circulation and movement rather than static snapshots or stagnation; points of contact and discontinuities rather than self-contained teleologies. It seems to me that paying attention to the context, politics, function and effects of translation can clarify, augment or challenge certain aspects of current narratives on national literature that may have previously remained obscure. Moreover, it allows us to speculate on new ways of seeing relationships between the multiple languages and literatures and not merely in terms of an impediment to the unity of the Indian nation; and this in turn might allow us to reappraise what translation means in the Indian context. Much more work needs to be done to recover connections between political institutions, power and translation in the Indian context from previous centuries, which given the number of languages and cultural interactions involved, demand collaborative research projects that bring together scholarly expertise from various fields. In the following section, I wish to pick up one of the threads from above, which I will call the *Ramayana* thread for ease

of reference, to comment on the extent to which interpretations of translation, elite and lay, have powerful political currency in defining India as a nation today.

### **An Essay on Translation, Two Interpretations of the *Ramayana* and Three Thoughts on its Uses**

In 2005, the History Department of the University of Delhi, a premier arts and humanities institute of higher education in India, included for the first time an essay written by A. K. Ramanujan (1991), ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’ in one of its undergraduate courses. The interdisciplinary history course, ‘Culture in India: A Historical Perspective,’ designed to create a critical understanding of the diverse cultural heritage of ancient India, began to be taught in 2006. After approximately two years, in February 2008, members of the right-wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a youth-wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party (a political party with conservative Hindu leanings and strong links to more fundamentalist Hindu factions such as the Rashtriya Seva Sangh but which enjoys substantial electoral support), and Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti [Movement to Save Education Association] violently attacked the then Head of the History Department, S.Z.H. Jafri, demanding that this essay be withdrawn from the course. Since 2008 this essay has been at the centre of a controversy that has involved the university’s teachers, students, academic council, vice chancellor, the Delhi High Court, the Supreme Court of India and Oxford University Press (India). Fierce controversy has ensued with strong opinions from both supporters and detractors regarding what this essay argues about the *Ramayana* and its translations.

A very brief note on the *Ramayana* for readers unfamiliar with this text is appropriate at this juncture. The *Ramayana* is one of the oldest surviving literary epic texts from the Indian sub-

continent telling the story of Rama. There are many accounts of the story of Rama, but in a nutshell, it is about a just and ideal prince who was heir to the throne of a kingdom believed to be in northern India but was exiled for fourteen years along with his young bride and brother due to the evil machinations of a step-mother. In the forests, the arch villain of the piece, Ravana, figuring at times as heroic and at others as demon, steals Rama's wife Sita to his kingdom Lanka in the South. Rama, with the help of an army of forest creatures headed by Hanuman, the monkey-god, travels down to Lanka to battle with Ravana, successfully rescues Sita and returns in triumph to Ayodhya to be welcomed back at the end of fourteen years and crowned king. This story is available in innumerable forms, as written and performance texts in the many languages of South and South-east Asia, continuing into the present. Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* has been considered chief amongst them in terms of chronology, sophistication and significance. The Rama story in its many permutations has the potential to operate at several levels simultaneously and either overtly or implicitly: the literary, sacred *and* political. Pollock (1993) argues that the Rama story offers 'a political mythology of efficacious simplicity...to be resorted to time and again over the...centuries' (287), and the many examples of how the story has been deployed in varied political contexts and ideological battles bears witness to this. The 'political' nature of the *Ramayana* tradition is manifest in readings that take it to represent the ideal behaviour of a king and his subjects located in a utopian state (Richman 2001: 6). But Richman's (2001) collection of essays also showcases examples from the powerful 'questioning' tradition historically embedded within the *Ramayana* corpus as well as those that employ it to critically comment on political situations in India, in Fiji and in the UK. Das gives us a further example of questioning in A. K. Velan's Tamil play *Ravana* (1948), where Ravana features as the hero, when 'with the consolidation of the Justice Party and the strengthening of Tamil Nationalism several writers in Tamilnadu [one of four southern states of India that mobilised against what was perceived

to be an aggressive north] denounced Rama and glorified Ravana as a Dravidian hero' (1995: 135). There is vast scholarship on the *Ramayana* traditions, as might be expected of such a long and sophisticated history but I focus here on the fate of Ramanujan's essay and why an apparently innocuous academic article celebrating the many renderings of the *Ramayana* and an attempt to offer a new perspective on translation in India has been vilified as an anti-national statement.

The essay was written by the celebrated poet-translator and literary scholar A.K. Ramanujan (1929–1993) who first delivered a lecture on the subject at the Conference on Comparison of Civilizations at the University of Pittsburgh in February 1987. In it Ramanujan offers a critical reading on, what he terms, the multiple 'tellings' of the *Ramayana* and how they relate to each other. His central argument is that each telling of the *Ramayana* should not be thought of as a 'version,' as the term immediately evokes, or even conjures into existence, an 'original,' that is a source from which all others derive. He argues, therefore, that Valmiki's Sanskrit *Ramayana* is not to be considered an original from which all other versions obtain but that this is merely one amongst many other tellings. Ramanujan does not deny that there is a relationship between these several hundred texts, forming in itself 'a genre with a variety of instances', just that this relationship is not hierarchical in nature. He does attempt to outline some schema for understanding how the multiple texts relate to each other: he distinguishes between iconic (indicating structural similarities), indexical (indicating the text's embeddedness in its local context) and symbolic (when a text may use the same plot, characters and structure but say new things with them) relationships (1991: 45). Ramanujan is equally open to rejoicing in the similarity between any two versions, where this occurs, as much as he cherishes and savours the differences between two renderings.

This essay is significant for several reasons. First, it focuses on a text that is considered key to Indian culture and history—holding literary, sacred and, by many, even civilizational valence—and by focusing on its several renderings seeks to highlight the importance of paying attention to our understanding of translation as an integral part of this history. Second, this article offers a theoretical perspective on translation in the Indian context and how we may view the relationship between texts. In that it stands out as an exception in the light of the paucity of theorising on translation that I alluded to at the start. By challenging a range of hierarchies assumed to be normative in the relationships between texts and languages, it also challenges the social and political hierarchies that have been interpreted in the light of the *Ramayana* as acceptable or indeed desirable. Third, it has initiated a rich body of scholarship on the *Ramayana* internationally, that started paying attention to the way this narrative tradition travelled across several language and sacred cultures, from India into South East Asia, responding to the several ‘theological, social, political, regional, performance or gender contexts’ (Richman, 1991: xi). Last, by inadvertently starting a storm of controversy, in real and virtual space, it foregrounds the extent to which ‘thoughts on translation,’ even a mere three, can be deemed politically dangerous, to be commandeered and contained in defence of protecting the Indian nation state and its culture as conservative Hindu lobbies, located both in India and globally, seek to define it.

What in this academic essay causes such offence to sections of the Indian public? To those who see themselves as gatekeepers of a glorious and untainted Hindu past, with the image of Ramarajya or the rule of the just and righteous King/Lord Rama at its apex, it is Ramanujan’s reading of how one may understand translation and how it has functioned in the Indian context which is highly problematic. Crucially, it is Ramanujan’s levelling argument that Valmiki’s Sanskrit *Ramayana* is just one of many tellings and so should be considered at par



with all other Indian and Southeast Asian tellings that is most controversial. He refers not just to the Rama story as told in other language traditions but also in other religious traditions, such as the Buddhist and Jain tellings. By giving equal credit or value to all extant tellings of the *Ramayana*, Ramanujan's thesis prevents the classifications of uncomfortable versions of the story as 'deviant' translations, with historical and moral truth resting firmly in one authoritative 'original'. Denying the existence of an original explodes not only powerful myths that for centuries have been central to the way translation has been defined outside of India but also challenges equally powerful and popular conviction within India regarding a historical king Rama who is believed to have taken physical birth at a certain location in the city of Ayodhya in real time and space. With their focus on other characters (and not Rama as central protagonist), the possibility that his wife Sita may have successfully been seduced by the villainous Ravana or the more sympathetic renderings of Ravana, amongst a plethora of other differences, the thesis of the coexistence of several hundred *ramayanas* challenge the Sanskrit Valmiki epic's place in the popular Hindu imagination as the sole authentic narrative. The other tellings become acceptable as long as and only if they can be labelled as 'translation', which can then be interpreted as having regrettably corrupted a pristine original in the process of translation. Placing Valmiki's *Ramayana* on the same playing field as all the other language versions of the *Ramayana*, Ramanujan's essay comes dangerously close to challenging the political function of the Rama story. The primary and symbolic power of the Rama story in the political imagination over centuries, as Pollock argues, has lain in 'the text offer[ing] unique imaginative instruments—in fact, two linked instruments—whereby, on the one hand, a divine political order can be conceptualised, narrated, and historically grounded, and, on the other, a fully demonised Other can be categorized, counterposed, and condemned' (1993: 264). Ramanujan's argument, giving equal weight to contesting versions of the story,

challenges such symbolic uses of the story for the symbolic ordering of human and cosmic worlds.

The controversy over the prescription of Ramanujan's essay for study is only one amongst a range of disputes over meaning and who has the right to make meaning. Particularly pertinent is the political and politicised controversy now known as the 'Ramjanmabhoomi' [trans. Rama's birth place] controversy which culminated in the brutal attack and demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992. The rather dubious claim underlying this violent raid was that the Muslim Babar (1483-1530), progenitor of the Mughal dynasty discussed in the previous section, had first demolished a temple celebrating Rama's birthplace and dedicated to him, and built a mosque on that very spot. A legal battle has carried on the dispute since the 1950s with antecedents in previous (dismissed) claims made to the British government during the colonial period, dating back to the 1850s. Simultaneously, there have been several archaeological investigations of the site since the 1860s to (mostly) prove the existence of a Hindu temple dedicated to Ram beneath the structure of the mosque. As Varma and Menon (2010) point out, most of these ostensibly 'scientific' or 'forensic' investigations have been conducted with pre-existing assumptions about the site with the aim of confirming claims made within oral and textual literary traditions rather than to make deductions based on the evidence that the archaeological site itself presents. The controversy has dragged on for so long that it is no longer relevant whether there was indeed a temple structure pre-existing the mosque on the site. What is of greater relevance is the persistent belief in the temple as the first, therefore, 'original' site of true worship with the mosque featuring as a later deviant copy.

The importance attributed to Valmiki's epic as *the* sole authoritative text and therefore as the only authentic account of Rama is indispensable to proponents of the view that India is originally and primarily a Hindu state with all other identifiable religious traditions featuring as either benign off-shoots or cancerous 'foreign' adversaries that must be quashed. Only the Valmiki Rama as the undisputed, untainted and righteous protagonist of this 'national' epic can function as the rallying force of waves of popular anti-Muslim (and later anti-Christian) sentiment that could be distilled into direct political action from the 1990s (from voting for the BJP to defending a supposedly beleaguered Hindu culture and identity by directly attacking Muslim and Christian communities). All other contesting language 'versions' in this schema can be tolerated so long as they can be written off as translations and, therefore, dismissed as counterfeit and misleading copies. The tension between Ramanujan's argument as a literary critic and translator and the exigencies of an increasingly polarised political discourse in India evident in the demand that his essay be proscribed from a university syllabus delineates this in a new context.

As I remarked earlier, this friction between the Sanskrit *Ramayana* and the many *Ramayanas* in the other Indian language traditions is not new. As several *Ramayana* scholars have pointed out the diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition has historically included questioning and multiple challenges to social, gender and regional hierarchies sanctioned by the Valmiki version, besides several episodes *within* Valmiki's version which challenge utopian idealistic readings (Richman 1991, 2001). However, what Ramanujan's 'Many Ramayanas' model also undermines is the linguistic hierarchy between Sanskrit as the privileged language of the few and the rest of the Indian languages available to 'the masses'. So long as the Sanskrit *Ramayana* is treated as the foundational text to which all other extant versions can be genealogically traced, the pre-eminence of the Sanskrit language, also associated in both elite

and popular discourses as the foundational language of Hinduism, can be maintained.

Attributing equal literary status to other language *Ramayana* texts comes close to challenging the unique sacred and literary potency assigned to Sanskrit.

There is however one rather noticeable problem with Ramanujan's model in putting forward the view that anyone can legitimately ask (and has asked) questions, suggesting that each such response would be equally valid (Richman 2001: 8). This raises an important question pertinent to our discussion: who has the power to challenge the established *Ramayana* tradition and whose voice will be heard? While this has been a contentious issue historically, I want to offer just one instructive example by drawing a link to the current controversy over the Murty translation project that began in early 2016. The Murty Classical Library of India, founded in 2010 by Rohan Narayana Murty, was set up to translate into English Indian literary texts from across a range of Indian languages. Accompanied by introductions, commentaries and textual notes, the original language texts and their translations are presented on facing pages to improve accessibility and encourage readers to compare between the two as much as they are able. Needless to say, the *Ramayana*, this time Tulidas's Hindi 'telling' has also been translated. Its General Editor, the American Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock, and one of the recent translators of the Valmiki *Ramayana*, however, has come under recent attack with signature campaigns, websites and articles in the popular press claiming that he is the wrong man to head a translation project of immense importance to the Indian culture and nation-state.

The Change.org petition addressed to Rohan Murty, titled 'Removal of Sheldon Pollock as mentor and Chief Editor of Murty Classical Library' is signed by 132 academics with little academic understanding of translation or literary studies and had been supported by 18,349

signatures at the time of writing.<sup>1</sup> The petitioners make the important association between translation and national politics: citing Pollock's critical stance of the Indian government's draconian clamp down of peaceful protests at Indian universities,<sup>2</sup> they argue that he is incapable of 'respect and empathy for the greatness of Indian civilization' or *sanskriti* (sharing its root with Sanskrit, the term means 'culture'). Accusing the Sanskritist of 'showing disrespect for the unity and integrity of India,' and echoing nationalist calls to unity, they state:

Pollock is a prominent signatory of two recent statements released by US academicians condemning the actions of the JNU authorities and the Government of India against separatist groups who are calling for the independence of Kashmir, and for India's breakup....Pollock does not claim to be politically neutral...We submit that such an individual cannot be considered objective and neutral enough to be in charge of your [Murty's] historic translation project.

By placing at the top of their list of questions, 'how will certain Sanskrit words that are non-translatable be treated?' the petitioners reveal that the question of who has the power to decode and interpret the Ramayana, its language and history is central to their conceptualisation of the nation state. Their question indicates anxieties regarding authenticity and interpretation that translation projects routinely throw into relief. In this case, anxiety over the interpretation of Sanskrit texts is put within the larger framework of a polarised politics of 'India' against a homogenous 'West'. Arguments offered in several blogs and newspaper articles linked to the petition would have us believe that 'Western' scholars of Indian language texts always deliberately undertake to destroy and debilitate the great and pure Indian culture in an extension of the colonial-Orientalist project. Their argument collapses heterogeneous tasks of interpretation, translation and historical engagement to

present monolithic identifications of the ‘West’ and ‘East’ in defence of a homogenous Indian culture.

Ramanujan’s essay is still off the Delhi University History menu. Although there may be thousands who argue against Ramanujan’s inclusion in an academic curriculum or call for the dismissal of Pollock as chief translations editor of Indian classics, there are an equal number who disagree. However, according to newspaper reports, Oxford University Press (India) withdrew copies of the book, which contained Ramanujan’s essay. I have been unable to ascertain whether they have now resumed publication of this volume of essays and whether it is available for sale. This is ironical since Ramanujan’s essay is a celebration of the availability of the *Ramayana* tradition in its myriad forms and shows his deep appreciation of the long and established tradition of composing challenging versions of the *Ramayana*. A further irony lies in that his ‘thoughts’ on translation, offers a framework that may not necessarily work as ‘theory’ to describe *all* translation projects undertaken in the Indian sub-continent. This is a question that awaits further investigation before it can be generalised as an ‘Indian’ take on translation.

### **Counter-narratives of Translation Practice: Three Border Crossings and Six Languages**

I have shown only very briefly how a study of translation projects can illuminate significantly on the political and cultural life of an India imagined as a ‘nation’ at different points. This is only the very tip of the metaphorical iceberg of course but indicates to what extent a critical engagement with histories of translation can contribute to our understanding of how meanings are constructed and serve to generate or sustain certain political narratives as the truth. At the same time, it is important to reiterate that I am not presenting a single translation history as a positivist recovery of an objective ‘truth’ about India’s political past but that this

is one possible attempt to chart historical events amongst many others, where one can select and arrange translation events to highlight specific aspects of meaning-making and efforts to construct India's identity as a unified nation. A focus on translation allows us to analyse how, when and why significance was attributed to some texts over others and what political ends these may have served or may continue to serve. For instance, posing translation questions reveal telling tales regarding whose works were traditionally chosen for translation and inclusion in the canon in the first place, usually those by upper-caste, heterosexual, male writers; and whose works were given second or no place: literatures by women, by queer writers, by Dalits or oral literatures of tribal communities and marginalised regions such as those that belong to the north-east of India. Such a literary map when placed along the grid of the political, nationalist map of India reveal the faultlines along which some literatures and people are simply rendered invisible when charting out the boundaries of what is acceptable as 'Indian.' However, it is important to remember that translation history can also serve teleological purposes, to either bolster *or* challenge national metanarratives. Remaining alert to the contingent aims and functions of translation acts will also help us avoid anachronistic interpretations of past translation practices and how they may have been mobilised in the name of the nation.

The work of several translators in contemporary India in their choice of text and in their choice of topics to translate present a counter-narrative to that of a majoritarian Hindu nation. The translation of resistant literatures into English has promoted interest in issues that might otherwise have been dismissed as marginal to the nation state. These literatures focusing on issues of acute inequality and discrimination faced by individuals and communities challenge the grand narrative of 'India Shining' that has become a part of mainstream nationalist political rhetoric almost contemporaneously. Translators of women's literature, feminist

translators, translators of dalit literature all challenge the monochrome colouring of 'India' in saffron that seeks to organise all aspects of Indian culture and society according to a singular interpretation of Hinduism. From amongst these, by way of a contrasting example to my discussion of Ramanujan's essay above, I select the translation of 'partition literature' as a resistant act and space that continues to disallow the representation of Muslims in the sub-continent as a Hindu India's demonic Other.

Partition literature was born with the three nation states: out of the political splitting up of a region formerly part of the British empire into two and then three separate nation states, India and Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh (which split from Pakistan) in 1971. The ideological rift was mainly along religious lines, Pakistan (both West and East Pakistan) conceived of for the Muslims and India for the rest. Partition, and the subsequent 'exchange' of populations by each government, led to wide-scale violent riots and brutal killings that destroyed families and communities. Partition literature is a specific genre that underscores the absurdity of political decisions that render millions homeless or for many years stateless; and it highlights the inhuman acts of violence, looting and rape that were perpetrated largely by three religious groups on each other: the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of the subcontinent. It focuses on the individual's emotional trauma caught in a post-independence triumphalist nationalism on either side of borders but explores a range of responses from lament for what was lost, to horror at what was witnessed or bitter anger at the absurdity and needless suffering. Despite the intensity of this shared theme, it is important to point out that partition literature is written in at least six different languages—Bangla, English, Hindi, Punjabi, Sindhi and Urdu—and by writers located in each of these three countries. Often subsequent violence based on religious conflict in any of the three nations or migration of peoples have revived an interest



in the theme, so that writers in India continue to use the first instance of partition as a point of reference to speak of current ‘communal clashes.’

Partition literatures from all these languages are translated, mainly into English, to make them available across the sub-continent. Translating this literature and juxtaposing short stories, poems and essays from across national boundaries cheek by jowl within one volume is an act of resistance that challenges jingoistic nationalism. Editors, translators and publishers have in each case, highlighted the cultural overlap despite religious or linguistic differences, the sameness of the underlying human condition and response despite belonging to different sides of political boundaries. Amongst the best known of such works are Alok Bhalla’s *Stories about the Partition of India* in four volumes (1994; vol. 4 2011), Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (1998), Tarun Saint’s *Translating Partition* (2001); Debjani Sengupta’s *Mapmaking* (2003), Bashabi Fraser’s *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* (2008); Rita Kothari’s *Unbordered Memories: Sindhi Stories of Partition* (2009).

Translating works from both sides of the borders also draws attention to the shared histories of language use, of Urdu, Sindhi and Punjabi, between India and Pakistan and Bangla, between India and Bangladesh. This is particularly pertinent in the trajectories of linguistic nationalism that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. For instance, Urdu, a language that is closely related to Hindi and Arabic, began to be identified as the language of the Muslims and Hindi as the language for Hindus. As a result, a de-arabised register was heavily ‘Sanskritised’ in order to give it an appropriate ‘Hindu’ slant. With partition, the linguistic rift congealed further into Urdu for Pakistan and Hindi for India. Bangladesh’s eventual break away from Pakistan also brought up the language question, this time a demand

for Bangla and not Urdu as their national language. Assigning specific languages as primary to specific geographical spaces has been an important but unattainable aim of the political and cultural lives of the three countries since 1947. Given these circumstances, it would have been very easy to translate literature on partition from any one of the three countries and to publish them as exclusively ‘Indian’ or ‘Pakistani’ or ‘Bangladeshi’ literary collections. By refusing to translate and publish partition literature as discrete examples of ‘Indian’ literature and by often collaborating across borders, these translators in their practice are intervening in conventional constructions of literary and cultural histories for India. The translation and publication of partition literature, I suggest, from several of these languages and from across the three countries in one anthology or volume is one form of resistance to the celebration of national boundaries: they evoke a different set of historical memories and shared pasts that circumvent ideas of what is ‘Indian’ and what is not. Partition literature in translation is just one example of a translation project that both contests the classification of literary history in strictly nationalistic terms and challenges the demonization of the Muslim as the Indian nation’s Other.

### **Related Topics**

The politics of translation in multilingual states, Translation and censorship

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

Das, S.K. (1991) ‘Prologue’ in *A History of Indian literature. 1800-1910, Western Impact: Indian response*, vol. 8. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1-19.

The introduction to the series offers an excellent perspective on the problem and politics of such the category ‘Indian Literature,’ while arguing for the importance of thinking critically about it in the future.

Merrill, Christi (2009) 'A Telling Example,' in *Riddles of Belonging: India in Translation and Other Tales of Possession*, New York: Fordham University Press, 44-104.

This chapter examines the political battles over the Rajasthani language, within contesting claims to linguistic belonging and caste identity in north India.

Richman, Paula (2001) 'Questioning and Multiplicity Within the Ramayana Tradition,' in Paula Richman (ed) *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1-21.

This essay comments on Ramanujan's work, linking it to the wider Ramayana scholarship and offers analyses of interpretations of the Ramayana and its relevance in contemporary South Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/mr-n-r-narayana-murthy-and-mr-rohan-narayan-murty-removal-of-prof-sheldon-pollock-as-mentor-and-chief-editor-of-murty-classical-library> Accessed on December 6, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and Hyderabad Central University, Hyderabad in India.